

PETER N. STEARNS

# Teaching Culture

UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION has not kept pace with knowledge about the role of culture in shaping human and social behavior.

Many professional and even liberal arts majors emerge from general education programs unsure about the “nurture” part of the nature-nurture equation—simply ignorant of or inadequately confronted with the challenging issues associated with cultural construction. The deficiencies can and should be repaired, but some real innovations are essential to the process. Despite the challenge, there is a real opportunity to parlay research advances emerging out of the recent “cultural turn” in a variety of disciplines into some exciting gains in important outcomes of liberal education.<sup>1</sup> The opportunity to encourage students to think critically about basic beliefs about how people and social institutions operate, which is central to cultural analysis, goes to the heart of liberal education.

### Cultural analysis

The core features of cultural analysis are not complex. They involve examination of the impact of fundamental beliefs and values—culture in what is most simply viewed as the anthropological sense—on social patterns and personal behavior. The subject includes, at the more conventional end, attention to the ways ideologies—religions, philosophies, political “isms”—shape social institutions and also assumptions about phenomena such as race, or poverty, or gender. It also includes attention to such issues as the role of beliefs and values in child rearing, or the definition and experience of disease, or displays of emotion. Recent work even explores the impact of different cultural systems on the senses, with variations, for example, in the bal-

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ance between smell and sight as sources of information about the immediate environment. Overall, the core focus in cultural analysis is on causation: determining what a relevant culture is, but then going on to determine what role it plays in shaping individual or social experience. In fact, this same focus promotes a critical understanding of categories of behaviors often regarded as fixed or immutable.

Defining a culture is, of course, easier said than done. Researchers often begin with prescriptive materials, the lessons given by preachers and imams, child-rearing experts and manners gurus, medical popularizers and fashion authorities (depending, of course, on time and place). Prescriptions have impact, but one wants also to get at “real” beliefs as evidenced by clusters of ordinary people through such vehicles as rituals, court testimonies, linguistic usages, and popular images. Values encountered in play or leisure constitute another angle, sometimes reinforcing core beliefs, sometimes providing deliberate contrast or relief. What, for instance, is the relationship among modern media violence, daily values, and resulting behaviors? And how did this relationship emerge from Victorian efforts to shape moral recreations, and what consequences did this change have? The interplay among recommended cultural guidelines, deeply-held values, and actual behaviors is challenging and complex, yet the cultural field has registered real gains in knowledge in recent years—the basis for further opportunities.

A number of disciplines have just gone through a period of intensive research on culture, often called the “cultural turn.” Branches of sociology, anthropology, history, English, and even an admittedly maverick strain of psychology participated in the cultural turn, and the interdisciplinary amalgam called cultural studies was heavily involved as well. The cultural turn had some drawbacks, which we will examine later. But it did significantly advance knowledge. Topics that once seemed reserved for purely scientific inquiry, like emotions, turn out to have substantial cultural dimensions, and in turn we know more about emotions than we once did thanks to the (still incomplete) cultural exploration.

In focusing on the cultural dimension of how things work in the human experience, cultural

analysis fairly obviously centers both on comparison and on change and continuity over time. Figuring out how different cultural systems operate, and what results they have on a wide range of institutions and behaviors, is a key part of the endeavor, deeply related to eval-

uating phenomena such as globalization. Why did Japan prove to be more open to modern consumer culture than the Middle East? What role (if any) do cultural factors play in the unusually high use of child labor in contemporary South Asia? Determining how cultures shift over time, and again what results this has on many human phenomena, is equally important. When, why, and with what consequences did American middle-class culture turn to a belief that parents should not get angry with children? What were the cultural underpinnings of the modern experience of anorexia nervosa? Why did respectable French people decide that certain smells, once accepted or even valued, were disgusting? While invitations for further research are legion, the list of achievements is long as well, and these achievements have improved our capacity to discuss what makes people tick.

Unfortunately, while this research has advanced—and in some cases generated heated debates—the advance in cultural research has not generated the kinds of curricular response that might have been expected, or, I argue, that is warranted. There are a few general education programs that have a cultural analysis category, but this is uncommon. More often, a cultural course may slip in as a social science requirement, one option among many; sociology of gender is one example. Full-blown cultural studies operations focus primarily on graduate students, though there is the occasional undergraduate minor or even major. Interdisciplinary majors, gender studies most obviously, strongly feature cultural analysis, but they don’t reach most undergraduates. The relationship between initiatives to change the liberal education core and the enhanced understanding of culture is haphazard and inadequate, reflecting the curricular failure to respond to new opportunities. Many students, in an otherwise good program, have no access at all. For others, access is random—“The sociology of gender course happened to be available”—and insufficiently connected to more systematic thinking about the approach.



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We need to explore the reasons for the gap, and how they might be corrected. And, returning to the main point, why they should be corrected.

### Pitfalls and possibilities

Many enthusiasts in the cultural turn complicated their mission, at least from a general education standpoint, by excessive commitment to arcane theory and a high level of jargon. At times, the goal seemed to be a private conversation among adepts rather than real educational outreach. On occasion an undue fascination with interesting but small and extreme cultural outcroppings affected presentations as well; thus, a cultural studies graduate student might be expert in a variety of small sexual communities while knowing nothing about larger cultural

standards or practices. These tendencies are declining, as the faddism of the cultural turn yields to more solid research. Issues remain, however, if only because of the remembered past. There is a need to work with a larger educational community to make sure major findings and approaches are accessible—as in final analysis they are, when the focus remains squarely on the cultural causation or construction of significant behaviors.

The cultural turn ran afoul of educational conservatives, creating another gulf that lingers. The tension was odd in one respect, because conservatism once delighted in cultural formulations as a cornerstone of traditions that should be preserved, as against more homogenizing liberalism. Now, however, the tables have shifted, and it is liberals who profess sensitivity to cul-

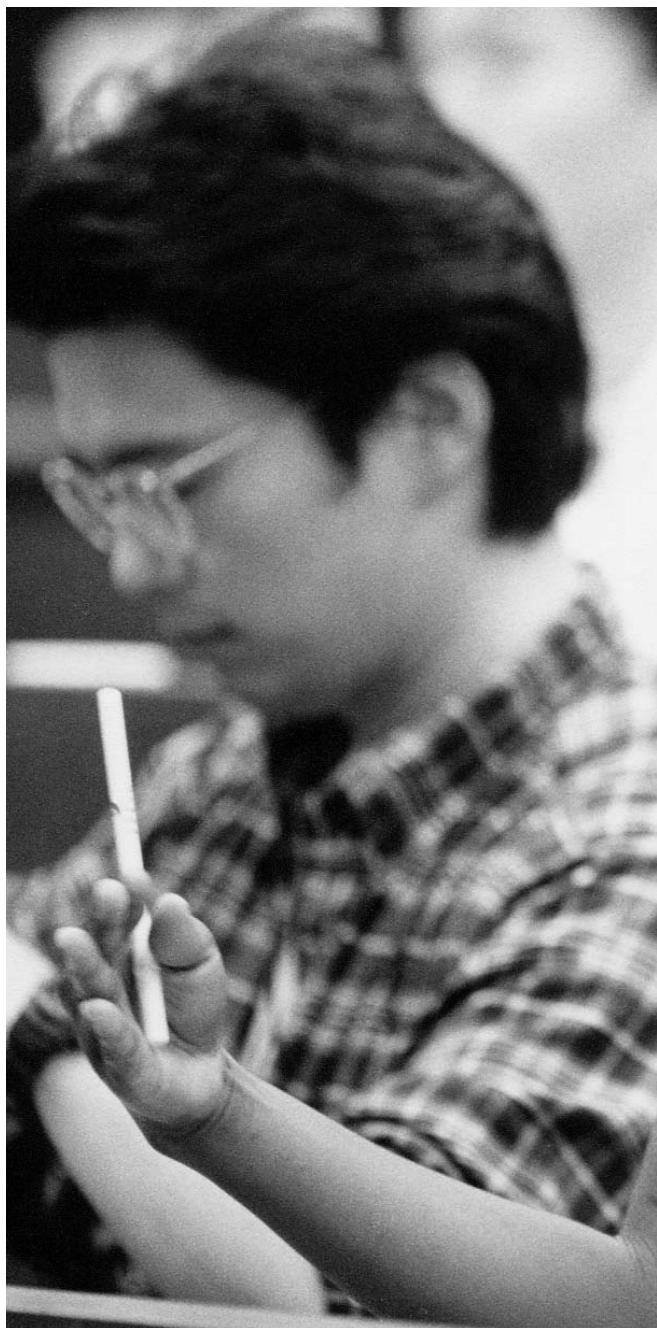
tural difference. One source of conservative misgivings about cultural analysis involves the interest it promotes concerning diversities within the United States, with conservatives preferring emphasis on a single, and presumably fairly glorious, national culture. For their part, many cultural studies partisans unquestionably delighted in berating conservatism and capitalism, in turn contributing to the divide. It was not always clear who landed the first punch.

Cultural analysis, however, is not partisan by definition, although there is a legacy to consider. Interest in organizational cultures within management programs, for example, yields important results that may benefit capitalism—though there is a crying need to relate this aspect of cultural research and training to cultural analysis more generally.

A key point to establish, against some conservative misgivings, is that cultural analysis does not require relativism in values. This is a tricky point, and one educationally challenging: but good undergraduate programs already help students with firm beliefs understand that they can compare and can consider new explanations—and can critically examine their own assumptions, in the process—without necessarily abandoning their convictions. One might argue, indeed, that this is precisely a goal of liberal education, which cultural analysis can serve. The culture wars have not ended, and cultural analysis is inevitably involved. But if the goal is to maximize educational outcomes rather than score debating points, we can improve on past conflict.

### The case of science

The interaction between cultural analysis and science involves another tension, though probably one more easily healed or modified. Some cultural researchers have been inclined to argue that culture, or even language itself, is everything, and that science is itself so skewed by unacknowledged assumptions that it has no role to play concerning the human condition. There is no controversy about nature versus nurture, for nurture explains the whole show: no natural maternal instinct, no natural attributes to gender, no natural heterosexuality. As a cultural studies colleague put it, referring to particularly intense graduate students: Contending that reality is a cultural construct means to some that when you say, "Have a nice day," you make the weather happen. Needless to say, this position is not



likely to enlist scientists' support for a wider role for cultural analysis in general education. Of course the extreme position was encouraged by equal extremism on the science side, for example on the part of some sociobiologists, who found every behavioral explanation in genetics. In this context, nature v. nurture, a fruitful educational debate, too often turns into a dialogue of the deaf.

In fact, the most revealing cultural analysis of human behavior recognizes dimensions that culture cannot by itself explain. The work on mod-



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ern anorexia nervosa, for example, did not deny real disease with real symptoms, but rather argued that cultural factors helped explain why the disease gained ground when it did, and how it affected some groups disproportionately. Some constructs, to be sure, have a lesser basis in nature: Race is an example. A complex range of natural and cultural interactions must be granted.

But here, precisely, is a key element of the educational opportunity. A general education program that includes work in cultural analysis but

also work in biology and/or psychology should provide opportunity for juxtaposition and debate, not just over principles but around specific topics. What's the genetic role in alcoholism or gambling addiction, as opposed to cultural explanations for changes or variations in alcohol use among different subgroups? What's male about aggressiveness, and how is it handled in different cultures (different by place, but also changing over time)? The prospect of joining discussion about nature and nurture is encouraged not only by the declining bombast among

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the cultural folks, now that the cultural turn is settling down, but by recognition among scientists, to paraphrase a recent book title, that it's not nature *versus*, but nature *and* nurture that explain the functioning of the species.

Courses in cultural analysis, as part of general education and not merely specialty programs that preach to the converted, have to recognize past problems. They do need to stress accessibility, giving pedagogical goals primacy over rhetorical secret handshakes. But there is an exciting opportunity to take advantage of past misunderstandings. Conservative students can be engaged by frank discussion about the tension between analysis and ongoing firm convictions—with results that will be helpful to liberal students as well. The culture-science discussion, including some bows to qualitative and observational versus more quantitative and experimental methodologies, can become fundamental to general education programs defined in terms of key liberal education outcomes.

The discussion can have an added twist in encouraging many students to confront popular assumptions either that science explains all or that science can heal what ails us. Science is important to understanding patterns of obesity, for example, and perhaps it will provide cures that depend on no cultural understanding whatsoever. But changing culture (as well as attendant shifts in styles of life) unquestionably plays an explanatory role in modern trends; the cultural

explanation may be relevant to remediation as well, as we're beginning to have some understanding at least of what culturally-contrived approaches to obesity don't work, including overemphasis on personal guilt.

**The case of humanities**

There is one final hurdle, less interesting in principle but huge in practice: the relationship between cultural analysis and the humanities. There is, unfortunately, a difference, and it looms large when thinking about cultural analysis in general education. The humanities sections of educational programs are usually filled with literature, philosophy, aspects of history, possibly foreign languages. All are relevant to cultural analysis, but none, save analytical cultural history, is fundamental. Great literature may reveal something of a society's basic values (Patricia Spack's splendid literary study of the origins of boredom is central to cultural analysis on this understudied topic). But it may not be the best way to get at them, and it's not usually the main point of a literature program. A good first-year course in French or Chinese should widen cultural horizons a bit, but this is not going to be the principal focus amid the travails of grammar and vocabulary.

None of this is meant as a slam at the humanities, in the mode of some cultural studies folks who delighted in attacking literature along with their other targets. A good general education program should have a humanities component and a cultural analysis component, and hopefully they will interrelate. But again, they are not the same thing.

Two practical problems result. First, inclusion of explicit cultural analysis in a general education sequence requires decisions about rearranging requirements: One cannot automatically turn to the English professor and assume he or she will do the job. We need to carve out some modest new space, and this is always challenging. Second, it must be recognized that many faculty will seek inclusion in the cultural analysis category but that some should be turned away. The desire for a wider audience and the confusion between cultural analysis and the humanities are both understandable, but that does not mean that beginning Spanish or Aristotelian philosophy (courses that successfully muscled into at least one cultural analysis category at a major university, partly in quest of enrollment) legitimately fit. Conversely, courses in anthropology

or sociology may often fit, despite their official social science labels. We need programs that include both aspects of culture, the humanistic and the cultural-analytic, recognizing that the interdisciplinary combinations differ from one category to the other, even though they overlap.

### Cultural analysis in the curriculum

Building cultural analysis into general education involves more than clarifying some past confusions and using some of them as the basis for constructive debate. Several additional steps are essential.

First, obviously, a real commitment is needed from some of the practitioners of cultural analysis to expand educational outreach and work in combination with the other participants in a general education program. Fleeing the freshman classroom to woo the ghosts of Foucault or Derrida will not suffice. At the same time, other faculty must be persuaded of the utility of cultural analysis, without themselves becoming adepts, so that its inclusion can be realistically discussed, and the painful process of deciding how to make room can be undertaken. In some cases, good cultural studies programs could be a launching pad, but this depends on their focus and flexibility. In other cases, new interdisciplinary combinations of faculty could take up the challenge, or be encouraged by academic administrators interested in seeing general education programs renewed and extended and the purposes of liberal education better served.

There are, happily, some good existing examples, including the scattered courses that already exist under rubrics like cultural anthropology or topics in qualitative sociology. Emerging programs on globalization sometimes include a cultural component, looking at globalization as a force for cultural change but also at syncretism and resistance, all in complex interaction. For over a decade, some units at Carnegie Mellon University have required a course at least loosely fitting cultural analysis criteria. New Century College at George Mason University offers a freshman course dealing with the larger aspects of cultural analysis. The course looks at Christianity, Marxism, and Confucianism as cultural contexts for discussions of nationalism and of identity, with explicit attention to the causal role of beliefs and values. It will be important to accumulate additional models as building blocks for further programs and to seek some outlets for progress reports.

What kind of courses work in a general education program? Obviously, we need both variety and experimentation; rigid formulas would be misplaced. But faculty should consider a mixed approach, so that emphasis rests on the basic mode of analysis associated with different kinds of cultural construction and the interaction of cultural and other factors. Thus, a course might offer an exploration of general cultural patterns associated with gender, or race, or some other large phenomenon, but also a case of cultural influence on personal behavior, as with emotions, or reactions to death, or the meaning of manners. As an example of the personal, consider the American approach to anger and how it affects work and family life, with due consideration to class, gender, and religious preference, and to changes over the past century that help explain why current anger emerged as it has.

Another combination (and these options are not mutually exclusive) would combine a comparative issue, including some sampling of a more exotic but not trivial cultural outcropping (Japanese and American shame and shaming, for instance), and a case of historical change over time, both focused on consideration of what cultural differences (either comparative or chronological) cause, in terms of social and personal patterns.

Combining a global case such as consumer culture (possibly through a comparison) and a significant American case that would push students to evaluate their own cultural determinants is another fruitful blend. On the more prosaic organizational level, it's possible to envisage a single basic course on cultural analysis, again with a range of specific topics, or a set of options, including freshman seminars, glued together by a shared, explicit, and recurrently discussed commitment to basic analytical goals and learning outcomes.

To promote these options without the additional challenge and expense of endless team teaching, a vital next step involves developing appropriate case study materials, including different types of evidence. One of the real boons of cultural analysis involves the relevance of visual and even auditory materials, which expands the interpretive assignment while drawing on different student aptitudes and interests. A course utilizing both anthropological and historical cases might thus have teachable segments such that an instructor from one of the two disciplines would be comfortable exploring the

other. (Anthropologists and cultural sociologists on their own are sometimes less comfortable with issues of change than historians are, historians sometimes more timid with comparisons.) Imaginative projects designed to develop curricula and course models are overdue but essential in keeping education at pace with exciting research.

One specific approach that receives insufficient attention in cultural research or teaching involves assessing deliberate efforts to manipulate culture, either for change or preservation. How can and should basic beliefs be altered—to create, for example, a better health environment or a more favorable context for democracy? Cultural factors, after all, raise the possibility of some explicit management, which may be a source for optimism about the human condition. What works, in recent history and in different settings? What backfires or raises obvious dangers? Again, the chance to develop some case studies is appealing.

#### **Assessing results**

The same challenge to curricular development applies to work on assessing learning results. There is no set amount of memorizable material essential for a student exposed meaningfully to cultural analysis. Lots of different cases will do, though, of course, faculty will have some bits of cultural causation or some particularly important large cultural systems that they especially want students to know about. So there is a chance really to work on replicable skills, for example, in dealing with comparative issues and in assessing the bases and results of cultural change over time.

Providing unfamiliar factual material and evaluating student ability to apply habits of mind cultivated through cultural analysis have exciting potential, meeting the legitimate demand that general education components demonstrate learning outcomes beyond rote recall. This approach to assessment offers a real opportunity to demonstrate the ongoing utility of cultural analysis in a general education program. A durable capacity to compare different beliefs about organizations or to evaluate claims about changes in beliefs concerning treatment of children is relevant to work and citizenship alike,

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and it is possible to measure how training improves the capacity. Again, however, this kind of evaluation requires thoughtful planning and support.

#### **Part of the whole**

It is essential, finally, to think about the cultural analysis segment in relationship with later academic experience. We have noted the importance of con-

structive interaction with scientific disciplines that also study the human condition. Here's an obvious, if challenging, focus for some capstone courses in a variety of majors. The desirability of touching base with other programs that teach culture has also been noted. The study of organizational cultures has become a standard part of management curricula, but we need to improve the relationship between self-appointed culture analysts in the humanities and the powerful but somewhat isolated organizational thrust. The same applies to cultural components in policy and political science programs. Without pretending a rigorous sequence of cultural study, there are serious opportunities to guide students from a fundamental initial encounter with cultural causation in general education to subsequent work even in professional programs. Cultural analysis, as a field of interdisciplinary study and education, will benefit in the process.

#### **Student response**

We already have some knowledge about how undergraduates experience courses in cultural analysis. Reactions mirror those generated by other segments in the general education program, while on the whole confirming the liberal-education potential of cultural analysis courses. Teachers who have worked with underclassmen on cultural causation report a tripartite division in initial responses: Some find cultural explanations quite persuasive, delighted at insights about why things happen as they do; others are open but less bowled over; and a third group, convinced that they know what they believe and/or eager to see reality as hard, tangible, and immutable, are initially uneasy if not downright resistant.

There's some sense, not well documented and obviously potentially self-serving, that groups two and three come to understand the utility of

the approach more fully later on, with due gratitude for having been compelled to encounter it. Students in group one, of course, often go on to further work, and sometimes need to be cautioned against going overboard in the culture-is-everything vein—which is where other segments of a coordinated general education program can already provide some useful correctives and debates. As we move to put cultural analysis more explicitly into education, we must expect differential results—again, a common experience—with some ability to claim real service to each student in stimulating a rewarding review of basic assumptions.

It's also useful to note that most students assume that cultures change only slowly, particularly compared to other factors. This reflects a predisposition toward some cultural stereotyping—Chinese culture is Chinese culture from beginning to now—and an emphasis on cultural identity over some other key cultural roles. The assumption can be worked with, debated, and challenged, and it adds further to the educability quotient.

And that, again, is what cultural analysis can claim to contribute to liberal education more generally: a way of thinking about aspects of human and social behaviors that shows the culturally contingent underpinnings of many qualities often regarded as fixed and immutable. The goal is not systematically to unseat student convictions, but to subject them to analysis and scrutiny—to make students think in new ways, and to provide tools that can be applied in explaining the human condition well after the general education program is completed.

For, to paraphrase inelegantly, the proper study of humans is humans, and liberal education properly reflects this while also giving play to other aspects of the physical sciences. Several basic vantage points for studying humans are available, and cultural analysis now is definitely one of them. We live in a society composed of many subcultures, but we far more often refer to cultural diversity than actually study it or the desirable balance between diversity and shared values. We live in a world in which cultural contact increases steadily, but many Americans have little experience in comparing cultures or assessing cultural interactions. We live, as human beings, amid many social categories and personal behaviors that are strongly shaped by beliefs and values, often beneath the surface of our awareness. The explicit introduction of cultural analy-

sis into the general education curriculum offers skills and perspectives that better suit students for their own society, for their global involvement, and for a thoughtful approach to their own lives. It can help, in fact, make undergraduate education more truly “liberal.” On all these counts, the addition of cultural analysis easily passes the test of providing both knowledge and habits of mind that will continue to improve understanding, years after college has been left behind. □

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#### NOTE

1. General education programs refer to required courses for undergraduates, often drawn from distribution lists. Liberal education refers to an educational philosophy that challenges students to evaluate basic assumptions and develop a range of understandings. The two may or may not overlap significantly. I try to use the terms carefully.